DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 462 538 CE 082 669

AUTHOR	Mojab, Shahrzad; McDonald, Susan
TITLE	Women, Violence and Informal Learning. NALL Working Paper.
INSTITUTION	Ontario Inst. for Studies in Education, Toronto. New Approaches to Lifelong Learning.
SPONS AGENCY	Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Ottawa (Ontario).
REPORT NO	NALL-WP-41-2001
PUB DATE	2001-00-00
NOTE	16p.
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/depts/sese/csew/nall/res/41women viole ncelearning.htm.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adult Basic Education; Adult Literacy; Anxiety; Battered Women; Cognitive Style; Developed Nations; Educational Attitudes; Fear; Females; Foreign Countries; Functional Literacy; *Immigrants; *Informal Education; *Kurdish; Language of Instruction; Law Related Education; Laws; Learning Processes; Learning Strategies; Legal Problems; Literacy Education; Minority Groups; Peer Teaching; Personal Narratives; Refugees; *Spanish Speaking; Stress Variables; Teaching Methods; Victims of Crime; *Violence; War; *Womens Education
IDENTIFIERS	Kurds; *Ontario (Toronto)

ABSTRACT

A comparative study of the impact of violence on immigrant women's learning was conducted among immigrant women of two communities in the Toronto area: the Spanish-speaking community and the Kurds. The two authors of the study each worked with one of the communities in which they had knowledge of the language. An in-depth, non-structured, conversational interview was used with 14 women of each group in order to document the life histories of these women as they experienced them. The Spanish-speaking women also participated in a workshop wherein they focused on learning about the law. All the women had been involved in violence, whether the mostly-domestic violence that the Spanish-speaking women had experienced or the political violence in which the Kurdish women or their husbands, sons, and brothers had participated. The study, reported separately for each group, found that the experience of violence places stress on the women that impedes their learning. The study also found that learning should be viewed as larger than just the learning of content--it includes learning to trust and act on their own behalf and take charge of their own learning. Some of the recommendations of the study included having peer-oriented learning groups to teach women about the legal system and the provision of legal materials in their native languages. (Contains 45 references.) (KC)

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NALL Working Paper #41-2001

Women, Violence and Informal Learning

Shahrzad Mojab
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Women, Violence and Informal Learning

This chapter is based on a comparative study recently conducted among immigrant women of two distinct communities in the Greater Toronto Area: the Spanish-speaking community and the Kurds. The purpose of the study was to contribute to our understanding of the impact of violence on immigrant women's learning. One of the main objectives of the study was to learn about the relationship between patriarchal, political, social, and economical power structures of violence and the experience of immigrant women's learning in the diaspora. The main question of this research was: How do women who have experienced violence either in domestic or war situations best learn about their rights, the law, and strategies for resistance? What features are similar or different between these types of learning? We argue that the experience of violence does impact learning and that this should be acknowledged. It should not, however, be seen as a delimiter or as an impediment to learning, but rather as an accepted fact which should be taken into account in any learning effort.

Each author worked closely with one of the two communities. The division of this labour was based on familiarity with the two communities and, in particular, the knowledge of either the Spanish or Kurdish languages. An in-depth, non-structured, conversational interview was used in order to document the life histories of these women as these were told, perceived, and created by them. The Spanish-speaking women also participated in a workshop wherein they focused on learning about the law. Kurdish women spoke of their learning as a "survival" process. Fourteen women from each community participated in the research. These women represented a cross section of socio-economic and educational backgrounds within their communities. Nevertheless, they shared many similarities as "immigrant" women in Canada; in particular, their labour force participation manifested the racialized and genderized nature of the Canadian job market (Mojab 2000).

The distinctiveness of the two communities has provided us with rich data by which to understand the impact of trauma caused by violence against immigrant women. In this study, the concept of "violence" against women was used broadly. We included women who were in situations of domestic violence as well as women who experienced political violence or violence as a result of war. The Spanish-speaking women had especially experienced domestic violence, while the Kurdish women either participated directly in the Kurdish nationalist movements or lived in a family where a close member (often a male member, that is, a husband, father, or brother) was a political activist.

In reporting and analyzing our data in this chapter, we will try to maintain the distinct voices of the women of each community in order to avoid hasty generalizations. Consideration of the particularities of each case can enhance our understanding of some of the hidden elements of violence and the subtleties of women's ways of knowing and learning.

Violence and Informal Learning

Although learning has been studied for a long time, as a highly complex and contingent human undertaking it remains inadequately theorized. In modern(ist) educational practice and discourse, the focus is on formal learning in schools and institutions; however, informal learning has always and at all times been equal to or even more significant than formalized learning as it continues throughout the life of an individual. We are just beginning to pay attention to people's informal, lifelong learning that is

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crucial for living in an ever-changing world (Garrick 1996; Hake 1999; Tobias 1999). There has been no significant theorization on the learning of uprooted, war-stricken women in the process of re-rooting in Western countries. Our study aims at contributing to the debate on issues of informal learning and begins from a premise that learning is a socially constructed phenomena and, as such, is "genderized," "racialized," and shaped by other social formations including class or immigrant status.

Our collective knowledge about violence against women has improved considerably. The academic journal Violence Against Women is now in its sixth year of publishing. In the area of action, too, there has been some progress, although one in three women around the world were "beaten, coerced into sex or abused in some way" at the turn of the twenty-first century. Under the pressure of women's and feminists' movements, ending violence has become a target of public policy; for example, the federal and some provincial governments in Canada have run television advertisements to raise public awareness about ending violence against women. For the first time, the 1999 General Social Survey by Statistics Canada collected data on spousal violence. In 1993, Statistics Canada released the results of the Violence against Women Survey, which was the first of its kind with 12,3000 women interviewed across Canada. The study found that 29% of married women (including those in common-law relationships) have been subjected to violence at the hands of a marital partner at some point in the relationship (Statistics Canada 1993). However, one of the criticisms of the Statistics Canada study was that it did not reach women who speak neither of the official languages (French or English) and that therefore the results do not reflect the prevalence of violence against women who speak other languages (Davis-Barron 1993: A16) such as the women who have participated in these projects. For instance, there are no statistically accurate studies on the prevalence of domestic abuse in either of the communities that we studied (McDonald 1999a). There is however, a mall, but growing body of literature looking at immigrant women who have experienced domestic abuse and their unique social, legal and economic problems (see, for example, Orloff, Jang and Klein 1995; Jang 1994; Roy 1995; Martin and Mosher 1995). There are also some studies (MacLeod and Shin 1994; Goldin 1994; Law Courts 1995; McDonald 1999b) that focus on the needs, including the specific legal needs of immigrant women in Canada. Crenshaw (1991), Richie (1985) and Richie and Kanuha (1993) all examine the issue of domestic violence in immigrant and visible minority communities challenging feminist writing. Ammons (1995), Wang (1996) and Dasgupta (1998) address the harm of cultural stereotypes within the domestic abuse context.

For every woman, the duration, nature and intensity of the violence varies and, consequently, the severity of the trauma experienced also varies. Yet it is essential to understand and acknowledge the impact of such trauma on learning for women. Judith Herman (1992: 33) provides the following definition of trauma:

> Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection and meaning. Traumatic events are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life. They confront human beings with the extremities of helplessness and terror and evoke the responses of catastrophe.

As Herman's definition suggests, when an individual experiences trauma she loses her sense of control, connection and meaning. The complexities of beginning a new life in the diaspora and learning about the new country's legal system (whether criminal, family or immigration law) can only compound this loss. The women must be able to regain control, connection, and meaning in order to live a healthier, fuller life.

The severity of the effects of trauma depends upon the quality and duration of the event, the availability and timing of appropriate treatment and conditions for recovery, or access to a safe place to re-settle into and the personality and coping strategies of the individual (Rathus and Jeffrey 1980). Rundle and Ysabet-Scott (1995:8) outline the effects of trauma in their work on violence, women and education. For example, they identify that there can be a difficulty in beginning new things or taking risks. This includes a fear of being punished, humiliated or rejected for making mistakes. As well, one's sleep patterns are often disturbed and the resulting exhaustion may cause individuals to find learning draining and tiring

Trauma erodes one's sense of self, one's self-esteem and confidence; there are feelings of blame, guilt and responsibility for the traumatic event. All these feelings can work to prevent an individual from becoming a successful learner. Indeed, the pressure to learn or to make decisions, as in a custody battle or dealing with settlement issues, can augment the feelings of guilt, shame and low self-esteem. These

feelings manifest themselves in many ways. One of these is through disassociation or a sense of detachment—spacing out, feeling numb, not being aware of what is going on. A further effect is the inability to concentrate, which may be manifested by difficulty listening, distraction or preoccupation. An individual may experience panic attacks, including faintness, dizziness, shaking or feeling out of control and flashbacks to the trauma itself or to the feelings that the trauma caused. Given the nature of domestic abuse or the condition of war, there may be a concern for safety: in the learning place, traveling, in the home. Finally, there may be health problems, such as depression or physical ailments. Perhaps the most serious of these effects is the inability to trust. Trust opens one up to vulnerability and alters power positions (Baier 1986: 240 and Shay 1995). It can create dependency, feeling vulnerable to disappointment or betrayal, and risking harm to oneself. Any of these conditions can create difficulties in the learning process.

There has been some study on trauma and the implications for learning. For example, Gowen and Bartlett (1997) look at women in abusive situations and the resulting impact on literacy learning. Horsman's latest work, Too Scared to Learn (1999), is a comprehensive text detailing her research across Canada with women around issues of literacy and violence. Horsman asked two questions of literacy workers and participants: 1) what impacts of abuse do you see in your literacy program? And, 2) how can/should literacy programs address the impact of violence? Horsman found that frustration was overwhelming for both workers and learners; learners felt that their failure to learn must prove that they are "stupid" and workers in turn felt incompetent. She argues that the link between violence and illiteracy is crucial and the silence must be broken in order to question the impact that violence has on literacy learning and to address how learning can be effectively carried out under these conditions. Horsman's concerns are our concerns here; we shall see learners' sense of failure echoed below, and shall suggest ways of overcoming traumatic impediments to learning.

Informal learning refers to how individuals learn at work and through daily interactions, which can occur on a continuum of intentionality and consciousness. Watkins and Marsick (1992) have proposed a theory of informal learning in organizations. Although their work has an organizational focus, the seven elements that they identify are useful for this study by contributing to a conceptual understanding of informal learning. One of the elements they identify is "delimiters," or the limitations of the learning context. These delimiters can be viewed as the framing problem, or the naming of the things to which we will attend, or the placing of limitations on our context. The delimiters in a given learning situation can limit learning to a narrower context. Various delimiters were evident in the women's situations: language, access to resources, lack of information, trauma and crises, as well as other survival needs. An understanding of these delimiters can assist us in facilitating learning. As English notes in her study, adults are "capable of sorting out the priorities that have meaning and practical benefit to their lives" (1999: 392). Recognizing these priorities and respecting them will go a long way to providing a meaningful learning experience.

Susan, Shahrzad, and the Communities of Women

Accessing traumatized women's learning and learning styles requires a special methodology of sensitivity. We utilized a feminist-anti-racist participatory methodology to facilitate the participation of the women in the definition of their learning process, legal needs, and in the design and implementation of solutions. This method enables the researcher to establish a relationship of trust and respect with participants in the research. We used multiple feminist research methodologies to facilitate the participation of the women in the definition of their learning process, legal needs, and in the design and implementation of solutions. Feminist methodology advocates an integrative and interdisciplinary approach to knowledge, with an emphasis on beginning with embodied people and their location in social space. This method enables the researcher to establish a relationship of trust and respect with participants in the research. We used feminist research methods such as oral history and testimony to collect different types of data; multiple sources of information lead to better qualitative studies as compared to those based on a single source (Green-Powell 1997). The use of testimony as an interview technique helped women who witnessed and/or experienced violence to alleviate their pain in remembering the events (Agger 1992). The feminist oral narratives enabled us to examine the Kurdish- and Spanish-speaking communities as a whole while locating the individual woman within her community; as Reinharz suggests, through the individual we can understand culture, and culture can help us to understand the individual (Reinharz 1992). In other words, feminist oral narratives and life history methods permitted us to participate in the social systems in which Kurdish and Spanish-speaking women were implicated (Thomson 1995; Clandinin and Connelly 1994; Freeman 1993; Okley and

Callaway 1992).

Susan and Women in the Spanish-Speaking Community

The Women's Program of the Centre for Spanish Speaking Peoples, Toronto, offers information, counseling and support to women who have experienced abuse. While the staff offer assistance in numerous areas, they themselves are not legally trained and there is no lawyer at the Centre who practices family or criminal law. As a result, the legal needs, both representation and information, of the clients are immense. Through consultation with the staff and based upon my own work (McDonald 1998, 1999a, 1999b), the goals of the first phase of this research were established. These were: 1) to identify the legal education and information needs of Spanish-speaking immigrant women who have experienced domestic abuse; and 2) to determine how best to address these needs with consideration for particular factors which could impede or enhance learning: the social location of the women, pedagogy, and the impact of trauma on learning. The goal of the second phase was to develop and implement the participants' learning and action ideas.

Drawing upon my relevant work in Chile, I conceptualized the research process as one that would move from individual (one-to-one, researcher and participant) to collective (the group of participants and the researcher) interaction and data collection (McDonald 1998). This process was important in facilitating the development of trusting relationships between the researcher, participants and community partners, and between participants themselves.

The staff of the Women's program believed that a traditional focus group would not be an adequate method for the collective inquiry. Given the experiences of the women, the staff believed that they would need a longer time period to become acquainted and trust one another in order to talk openly and work well together in a group setting. Therefore, a retreat and workshop were designed to address this need, and the research was divided into two phases.

A total of fourteen women were interviewed in the summer of 1999. The majority of the interviews were in Spanish, with some in English if the woman so chose, and took place in their homes. Many, but not all, of the women were clients or former clients of the Women's Program. Their ages ranged from mid-twenties to mid-sixties. All but one was married and all but one had children; some had grandchildren. Most had permanent residency or citizenship status in Canada. Their education and class backgrounds varied widely. The majority were in receipt of social assistance, although some were working. The group was clearly socially diverse.

The retreat and workshop took place at a farm outside of the city. The first day was spent getting to know one another, swimming in the pond and enjoying the outdoors. For many of the women and their children, this was their first time out of the city.

The workshop took place on the second day. A variety of participatory activities were used which allowed the women to design a legal education and information program to address their needs. Maintaining the confidentiality of the data collected during the individual interviews, the workshop and activities were developed to reflect those identified needs. Hence, after introductions and the opportunity to talk about expectations, a group agreement was developed to use for the day based on respect, trust and confidentiality. The women were then led through an exercise designed to understand differences and similarities, as well as privilege and discrimination. The next activity identified barriers in accessing the legal system—both in theory and in practice. After a break for lunch, there were two more exercises. The first was to identify the women's legal information and education needs and the second was to design a program that would address these needs. All the activities were grounded in the women's experiences and the women had enough time to share and learn from one another.

Data were gathered to identify specifically the legal education and information needs of Spanish-speaking immigrant women who have experienced domestic abuse and to determine how best to address these needs. The individual and collective inquiry also produced a significant amount of data on several other themes: power in domestic relationships, the nature and form of abuse, the women's experiences with the legal system, and their learning strategies during crises and at other times.

Shahrzad and Kurdish Women

The Kurdish nationalist movement is among the most persistent ones in modern history. Since the end of the Second World War, it has involved four nation-states (Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria), major western and eastern powers (in particular the United States, Britain, France and the former Soviet Union), and multiple local actors including various political organizations and different classes such as landowners,

peasants, workers, and urban bourgeoisies. Women have participated in the movement in diverse and changing roles, from a marginal non-presence to a more active involvement in the conduct of politics and war. In the last two decades of the twentieth century, women joined the ranks of guerillas fighting against Turkey and Iran, entered parliamentary politics, published journals, and created women's organizations. However, the patriarchal nationalist movement continues to depict women as heroes of the nation, reproducers of the nation, protectors of the "motherland," the "honour" of the nation, and as guardians of Kurdish culture, heritage and language.

Although women are participants in the nationalist movements, they are subjected to the gender violence of both their own nation and the nation-states they are fighting. While the literature on Kurdish nationalism is growing in quality and quantity, research has ignored the gender dimension of the war in which women are targets of both internal and external violence. This study was an effort to bring to the fore some of the hidden consequences of the war on Kurdish women. Some of the questions addressed in this research included: what happens to a wife of a political activist who remains behind, in enemy territory, while the husband is fighting or seeking refuge in remote mountain areas? How is the wife treated by her family, her in-laws, and the security forces? What happens to her children? How does she support herself and her children financially? How is life after reunion with the husband? What is the impact of years of separation on the marriage and children? What is the impact of dislocation to a new locale or in the diaspora in the West?

Kurdish women's responses to these questions have illuminated, in more detail, women's ways of strategizing for survival, ways of learning how to resist "organized" violence, and how to transfer that knowledge into other spheres of life such as "resettlement" in the diaspora or coping with the challenges of new life in exile.

During the months of July and August 1999, nine Kurdish women in Ontario were interviewed. The women were recruited through the researcher's contacts in the community. The Kurdish community in Ontario is fairly small, though it is among the largest in Canada. In-depth, non-structured interviews were conducted in the participant's language of choice, either Kurdish or Persian. Interviews were taped at the woman's home. The interviews were scheduled for two hours, however, they went much longer than that; the shortest interview was about four hours and the longest one was about twelve hours. The desire for narrating one's life history through the medium of the interview was very strong among the Kurdish women. This study indicates that learning to survive among Kurdish women completes the circle of their life history in which struggle, resistance and desire to live abound.

Women's Informal Learning about Legal Rights

The Spanish women were asked during the interviews about how they wanted to learn or how best they learned. For many women, this was a difficult question, perhaps because they had never been asked such a question before. The effectiveness of the workshop, which took place after the individual interviews, was clearly demonstrated in this area of data collection. Through the interview, the women had become familiar with the question and most had expressed their ideas about how they wanted to learn and how they learned best. These ideas were affirmed and this may have assisted the women in speaking out during the workshop discussion. Several hours were dedicated to brainstorming on this issue and women were asked to develop a program to address their learning needs. Working together, they did just that and were aware that the strategies they generated were theirs. The collective inquiry really did help the women to develop group ownership of information and solutions to problems.

During the interviews, the majority of the women did speak about circumstances when learning was difficult for them. Learning was most difficult at a time of separation, which for the women meant a decision to leave their spouses or that their spouses had been arrested. In abusive relationships, the time of separation is a time of danger, insecurity, and great loss. Tita described her inability to concentrate at this time:

> Now I am more calm. I don't have many problems because when I separated, I had many problems. I had many doubts, so that nothing else fit in my head. I was going to school and I was not able to concentrate. I could not pay attention to the teacher.

Natalia, who was in an extreme crisis state at the time of separation, noted:

> To learn something like the laws and your rights, you must be very focused. This is not possible during these first days. As soon as the woman is sure about the future of her

children, at this moment, she will begin to calm down a little. That is the most important thing. And afterwards, when she realizes that they are not going to deport her.

She further noted that:

> Groups are good, but at these moments, no. When one feels more safe, comfortable with what has happened.

The women expressed how they felt at the time of separation and how it affected their ability to concentrate. Ana Maria echoed their thoughts:

> It's very difficult because it is a crisis. You don't feel well and you feel very isolated. The head is full and you can't focus very well. So participating in a group would be very difficult. All the adrenalin was inside. I would not have been able to sit and talk with a group of women. I felt crazy and acted as if I were crazy.

As Herman describes (1999: 33), the women here have lost their sense of safety and control. Because of this loss, Natalia and others indicated that learning or working in a group would not be appropriate at this time. Their ability to trust had been challenged and individual support for learning would be necessary.

The women also talked about the content of the information they received at the time of separation:

> I want a paper that says that I have custody of my child. I don't want to hear that the system is going to judge if I am a good mother, if he is a good father, and what is best for the child. Agh!! No, no I don't want to hear that. But she called me and explained everything to me.

Unfortunately, the legal system cannot provide the desired guarantees in many situations, particularly around issues like custody and immigration status. As well, the lawyer is required to present the client with their options and the client is to instruct the lawyer on the appropriate action to take.
Issues in family law often raise complex emotions. A few of the women expressed their feelings about their relationships, as in the following instances:

> This was very, very hard for me because it was like actually acknowledging that my marriage failed and I'm like the only one in the family that has that. And everybody looks down on that.

These emotions form part of the experience of marital breakdown for women and there should be space to include such feelings in any learning about the law.

The results of the study demonstrate that at the time of the separation, the women want individual assistance. The data indicated that the women are seeking straightforward information and advice about their legal options. Too many options are confusing, and the lack of sure outcomes only contributes to their sense of instability, fear, and lack of control. Crucially, there must be room to express their feelings in a non-judgmental, safe environment.

For the majority of the women, an intermediary (a counselor or friend) was involved throughout their contact with lawyers. The intermediary became involved for several reasons. First, English was a second language for all of the women in the study. Even the women who had arrived in Canada as children and thus had achieved fluency in English expressed their confusion over the legalese used in their contacts with lawyers. The intermediary played the role of translator, not just for English to Spanish and back, but also from legalese to simple terms. In many cases, the women spoke to their lawyers exclusively through their counselors or friends. Second, the intermediary assisted with access to lawyers or to the legal system in general. The Women's Program has developed considerable experience with the various rules and procedures in both family and criminal proceedings. All of the women spoke about learning from their friends who often were able to give them important information which facilitated their ability to access legal assistance. Finally, the intermediary was often the one person the woman trusted. The intermediary may have been the first person the woman approached about an abusive relationship. The intermediary played a strong supportive role for the woman and allowed her to talk openly about her experiences. The intermediary fulfilled the three functions of providing translation, access, and support for the women and became indispensable to her in her daily life. A relationship of dependency was often

created in which the women looked to their intermediaries for assistance with all aspects of their legal cases; the women developed the strategy of utilizing peer supporters to address their needs at the critical time of separation. Learning in Spanish or learning in a bilingual setting was important to all the women, as many of them realized that the legal vocabulary that they would need is in English. Women also spoke at some length about factors that would enhance their learning. Gabriela noted:

> I would like to learn in my language, I understand more that way. I would like to participate. There are personal things, my experiences that I don't want others to know about, but I would like to help. Also visiting the court and having written materials. The use of skits would be good also.

Learning by seeing and doing was also important to the women:

> I liked the Victim Witness Program because it actually let me see the place where I was going to be. I had a guided tour. I would have liked to have seen a trial, 'cause I only ever seen a trial on TV. So I would have liked to have seen one and learned about it.

Celeste talked about the importance of not feeling overwhelmed, especially when the topic is complicated:

> I find that one session is not enough. It's too overwhelming. I find that it's too much information at one time and if it were cut in half—one session, some written stuff to take home and read, then the second session, you could move on and understand it a bit more.

Written materials, again in Spanish or in both Spanish and English, were important to all the women.

> Reading is important. When I need to learn something or understand it, I will read it through very well.

> Also some practice papers. Working through the documents would be really helpful. Like if you have a document, a fake one, but a real one, then you could go over it and actually write on it and understand what it meant. So when you see it in court, it's not as scary.

While Community Legal Education Ontario does produce written materials, few are in Spanish and few are on family law issues. A study on the legal information needs of low-income women regarding the Child Support Guidelines (McDonald 1999b) demonstrated the overwhelming need for basic materials in family law. Cossman and Rogerson, in their submission to the McCamus Report on family law and legal aid, call for a "greater emphasis on and availability of educational materials" (1997: 910). Given the complicated nature of many legal issues, Ana commented that written materials, while good, are not enough: "People read, but they don't understand."

Women consistently emphasized the importance of learning from the experiences of other women. Given that much of the information women obtain is from their friends or other women, this is not surprising. Maria noted that "The adult carries her experiences—the experience is very important." Wendy, who had negative experiences when she sought assistance, summarized her thoughts in this way: "We learn a great deal through our friends. For example, there are many women who have poor concepts of the shelters. It's better to unite together, I say." Wendy had a clear understanding of how negative images of shelters and other social service agencies or individuals are developed through her own experiences and that of many friends. She believed, however, that through positive reinforcement from friends, women could access the resources that are there to help them. In a similar manner, Cynthia talked about the importance of confidence that you gain when you are not alone: "You are going to be much more confident because it's a friend who has experienced the same thing."

These thoughts have been echoed in the poverty law scholarship. In the traditional model of lawyering, issues are dealt with as distinct, unrelated disputes, without reference to the larger contexts, whether of gender, class or race. Alfieri (1988: 683) calls this "dependent individualization." Despite changes in lawyering, the isolation inherent in a lawyer/client relationship based upon individual casework cannot lead to empowerment. Lopez (1992:52) notes that "existing practices too often isolate lawyer and client from other problem-solvers. Thus, the clients see their problems as only their problems, as if they exist in a vacuum, which reinforces the alienation, isolation and shame that they

may already feel. They are denied the opportunity for, and the potential empowerment that lies within, the collective force of the community. The women who participated in this study recognized this.

Celia reflected on her experiences with the legal system. While talking about how alone she felt, she noted: AI would have liked to have had the experience of other women." Tita confirmed her thoughts: "I think it would have helped me a great deal to have the opportunity to hear the experiences of other women with the legal system." Cynthia beautifully described the emotional and intellectual learning that can occur when one uses the experiences of women as a foundation: "One learns a lot with the experience of other women. It's an interchange of ideas, an interchange of emotions, an interchange of problems." Popular knowledge, or common-sense knowledge, is a key feature of participatory research (Maguire 1987: 38). It is that knowledge belonging to the participants at the grassroots level. Informal learning assumes that ordinary people have a rich knowledge base and are also capable of generating the knowledge necessary to engage in activities for their own and others' benefit. The women interviewed here clearly believed in their own knowledge and that it should be valued and part of any learning experience.

At the same time, during the workshop and the interviews, the women emphasized a role for professionals, for people who had experience with the legal system. The women acknowledged that there is much information that they lack and that they do need to begin to understand the implications of the law as it applies to them and to their situation:

> I would like to hear from professionals because they have the experience. I think it's important to hear from friends too, but they don't always have the answers—they know only what they went through.
>
> I would like to learn through a person or persons who would explain to me what the law is about.
>
> We know that people often do lack information, skills and experience to critically understand and analyze the social structures and relations that shape them. The women themselves recognized this and decided that they wanted professionals to be involved to address this problem.

A structured learning environment seemed to be important to the women: "It would be better to attend a course, or classes, because I always learn better [there]. Ms. Ruth has given talks and I like those." Similarly, Gabriela believed that a teacher, a facilitator, helps her learn. She also highlighted the importance of participation to reinforce any individual learning through reading:

> I learn better when someone teaches me, orients me, gives me information. Participation is very important. One's rights and the rights that the court has—you have to read these, but I learn more participating.

Margarita noted that for her:

> Participation really, really helps as well. I don't like it when one person is talking and talking 'cause I find when they do all the talking that I stop paying attention.
>
> But some talking and lots of questions.

While learning together in a group is important, individual attention is critical during times of crisis:

> I believe that discussions and workshops are good ways to learn. That helps a lot—working with other women with the same problems in groups. And with the necessary information—because ignorance is the worst—one feels completely lost....

The size of the group does matter as Margarita noted: "I think a small group is better than a large group 'cause then you get everyone talking and everyone's ideas."

The women were clear about their needs. Regardless of the level of formal education each had completed, they were very aware of how they learned best. Working together, the women combined their collective desires and wisdom and recommend a program that would address their needs. Thus, a partly

structured learning environment emphasizing a facilitated participatory approach is crucial for building upon the rich knowledge that the women already have.

Women and Informal Learning about Survival

When I approached the Kurdish women about participating in this research, they were all very modest about their role and contribution. A typical response was that "you know everything, how can I help you?" or "What is in my life that could be of any interest to you, or has any value to others?" This sense of "uselessness" was further aggravated by a sense of "aging." Before getting to know these women better through the interviews, I over-estimated their age. They appeared older than their actual age. Years of war has worn these women down and has affected their learning pace and purpose, especially when it is put in the context of the diaspora and learning to live a new life. Nahid says:

> It takes me long to learn something. I've become forgetful, I even do not remember some of the events in my life any more. I don't know if this is good or bad. But, I study hard for my English vocabularies, then I go to my class, I don't remember them. I feel sorry for the teacher, she is nice. Sometimes, learning the meaning of a word takes me to the distant past and all the horror of life during the war, then I forget the meaning of it again.

Hewa is also preoccupied with her age, however, she is determined to learn:

> I only wished that I was younger so I could continue my education in order to be more helpful and help people. I have written poems about this. The reason that I could not get my grade twelve diploma was because of continuous harassment. My dream was to finish university, and to be a teacher, and I am working towards that goal. Wherever I went they required ECE [Early Childhood Education]. So, I decided to go after getting my degree. A woman who is even older than me attends school, so I decided to push myself and begin learning the language and apply for ECE. I got advice from a good teacher who told me to go to a college. I was so interested that I stayed up until 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning to study. But the day after I could hardly remember what I had studied. This was very troublesome and I could not understand why I did not learn much. I had depression as well. I was very sleepy all the time, I often fell asleep in the class. But I decided to continue....

Hewa received her ECE certificate on June 29th, 1999.

The Kurdish women showed a strong desire for having control over their lives and especially the future of their children. This desire was combined with a stronger sense of "motherhood," that is, sacrificing their own happiness and well being for the sake of their children. Below is my conversation with Gilan who expressed this need so clearly:

> I worked for several months, full-time, distributing flyers. I wanted to buy a car. [I interrupted her and said, "But Gilan, you just said you can't read or write in any languages, how can you get your driver's license?" She continued:] I need to be independent, I want to live like a normal mother. I have suffered so much that I want to make sure that my children will have all they want. You know that distributing flyers is very bad for my back, Pasdarans [Khomeini's security guards] kicked me so much that now I have a defected lower back. But, I needed a car so that I could drive my kids to McDonalds and do my shopping. I begged friends to teach me to drive and now I can drive. [Again in astonishment, I said "But you don't have a driver's license and you can't read." She replied:] I'm careful, and I found out about a place where you can pay $25.00 to someone and they will take the written test for you. [I again insisted, and asked her: "But what about following an address, names of the street, stores, etc.?" She said:] If you write it clearly I see it as a drawing and can read it. I always go to the store with my kinds and they help me with reading the labels.

Gilan's strong desire to build a better life for her children is an impetus to learn; like many people, she is a visual learner who reads labels and signs pictorially.

Years of experience with injustice and oppression have incited Kurdish women to seek justice and to

help others. This is best manifested in their interaction with authorities as they try to resettle in their new environment. Hewa recalled her interaction with an immigration officer and said:

> After arriving in Canada, one day I went to the immigration office, all by myself for the first time. A woman officer asked me if I spoke Arabic. I said no, but she said I was lying because she has seen me the other day speaking in Arabic with another woman. I was shocked to hear her say that and I began to cry. At that moment, I begged God to give me the necessary knowledge to help the people who come to Canada and do not know the language. That is how I got involved with volunteering in a settlement office. I was offended by her comments. I was surrounded by some Kurdish and Iranian men who were wondering why I was crying so hard. Another officer came and asked me for my name so that they could find the officer who was in charge of my file. He was Mike and was a very nice person. I told him to tell her that not everybody who comes to Canada are criminals and thieves, we were somebody before coming to Canada.

The process of understanding the "informal" mechanisms of learning among the Kurdish women in the diaspora raised other issue midway through the research that I had to incorporate into our study. I found out that I had to record the women's lives in great detail if I was going to make any sense of what was going on. In fact, I had to re-visit my methodological approach, and combine feminist participatory research with oral history, memory, and testimony in order to capture their learning experiences. The reason for this was the ever-present stories of "past," "home," "war," "motherhood," "martyrdom," "enemies," "land," "national pride," "heroes," and "leaders" in the women's lives. These notions were tightly woven into the fabric of their lives. This means that the understanding of "informal learning" mechanisms and strategies should be contextualized within the historical, social and cultural life experiences of participants. In this contextualization, understanding and identifying relations and structures of power are fundamental. The importance of this was brought home to me during my recent visit to Iraqi Kurdistan where I "informally" interviewed women in positions of power, including ministerial positions, about their process of learning—learning to come down from the mountains and putting down their arms, now managing the affairs of a nation which is in the process of creating itself. At the beginning, they gave me a blank look and were surprised with the naivety of my questions. They often answered by saying, "You know, you should know our history," or made a specific reference to significant historical events such as the 1991 uprising. The integrated connection that they made between their learning process and their lives made me conclude that the need for contextualization goes beyond the diaspora experience itself (which includes personal experiences of trauma in the homeland).

There are many obstacles in engaging Kurdish immigrant women in a collective "informal" learning network. I would argue that, whether the learning is formal or informal, the motivation to learn, or understanding what needs to be learned, depends on consciousness. A relevant question, emanating from the experience of Kurdish women, is how we can link social justice issues and the questions of race, gender, class and all other bases of marginalization to the processes of "informal" learning.

Furthering our Understanding

These parallel studies acknowledged from the beginning that trauma as a result of violence can impact learning. During the individual interviews, the women spoke at length about fear, uncertainty, anxiety, stress, self-doubt, lack of confidence, and more. They spoke about their learning needs and that they wanted simple, clear, and direct information. Our research suggests that traumatized women need individual, one-on-one support. They are seeking uncomplicated information and simple advice. Too many options are confusing, and the lack of sure outcomes only contributes to their sense of instability, fear, and lack of control. We also realized that it is essential to focus on more than just outcomes in any program for learning about something as complex as the law. Learning may be going on as women learn to connect, to trust, and to share again. This learning must be acknowledged and valued. As others have suggested, we also noticed that learning occurs when the critical elements of action, or attending to the experience, and reflection are present (English 1999; Merriam and Clark 1993).

We know from the data that there were several factors that limited the women's learning. These delimiters included: the lack of connection between the content of learning and the social and political consciousness of the women; their lack of personal or active involvement in their legal experiences; the impact of trauma on learning; and finally, the traditional model of legal services that does not emphasize client learning. We suggest that, rather than seeing delimiters in a way that limits learning, they must be

viewed as critical tools in framing an appropriate context. If the delimiters of the learners are respected, then greater learning will occur in the long run. If learners have a positive, but limited learning experience, they will be more likely to widen their vision to include the larger context at another instance. We realized the degree to which the impact of trauma can be seen as a delimiter; this, in particular, has not been previously recognized in public legal education (McDonald 2000). Trauma is a terrible impediment to learning; women cannot learn when they have been so horribly damaged by their experiences. Recognition of the limitations is necessary to ensure a positive learning experience for those involved. However, it is equally important to consider the experience of violence as a new source of learning, its basis, a learning that can transform social, sexual and political relations of power.

Finally, we believe that the distinction between formal, non-formal, and informal learning is an important one, and allows us to better understand the dynamics of learning. We need, however, to be aware of the complex relations between these forms of learning; we need to know especially their social and historical contexts. It is no accident of history that formal education began to displace informal learning with the rise of industrial capitalism; there was then a much more complex division of labour in industry and agriculture which created highly specialized skills and jobs to an extent that informal learning was not able to transmit requisite skills. For example, considering our project, we know that the legal profession is extremely complex; its language is formidable even for the well educated. Few of us understand the full implications of a lease we sign with our landlord. Even in campuses, law libraries are separate, with their special collections and organization. The question is: How can anyone understand this complex system through informal learning? In other words, complex division of labour and overspecialization create conditions which demand formal learning. Understanding this relationship between learning and social and economic imperatives allows us to understand the policy implications of learning. This raises the issue of the role of the state and the market in the provision of training, the creation of skills, and the structuring of the job market, and the place of "informal" learning in this complex set of relations. Such policy implications must include recognition of the special needs and abilities of diasporic women who have been traumatized by experiences of violence either in their homeland or their new nation.

Notes

1.. This study was funded by the Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Settlement (CERIS) and the OISE/UT New Approaches to Lifelong Learning (NALL) Research Network. We appreciate this generous support.

2.. This information is based on the United Nations annual report on the Sate of the World Population released on September 20, 2000; see Elaine Carey 2000: A22.

3.. "Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile 2000" (85-224-XIE) is available, electronically, from Statistics Canada=s web site at (www.statcan.ca). Some of the highlights are: 40% of women reported physical injury as a result of violent marriage relations; women in violent unions were almost five times more likely than men to fear for their lives; about 26% of women reported that they had been beaten, 19% sexually assaulted, 19% chocked, and 17% threatened with a gun or knife by the present or previous partner. Some 15% of all homicides in Canada are espousal homicides. Women under the age of 25 are considered at greatest risk of espousal homicide; husbands used firearms in four out of every 10 espousal homicides. The 1999 General Social Survey does not account for the racial or ethnic dimensions of violence; for a critique of the silence about male violence in ethnic communities, see Himani Bannerji (1999).

4.. See also Bannerji (1999).

5.. Estimates on the size of the Spanish-speaking population in Toronto vary, depending upon definitions and measurement methods used, but an accepted number is 145,000. The Kurds constitute a much smaller number and are more recent arrivals to Canada. According to the 1996 Statistics Canada survey, there are 4,225 Kurds living in Canada.

6.. All names of women who participated in the study have been changed.

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